

**On *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*: MacIntyre, Strauss, and
Modern Aristotelianism**

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Abstract. MacIntyre and Strauss share a common project: the interpretive revival of the voices of Aristotle and Plato to formulate, for modern purposes, a sceptical framework for ethical and political critique that is neither relativistic nor dogmatic, and that cannot be achieved on the basis of mainstream modern moral and political philosophy. Both MacIntyre and Strauss hold that a turn toward ancient Greek philosophy can lead to a more accurate understanding of the possibilities and problems of our modern world. Even where they disagree, as in the case of the theoretical status of Aristotle's species teleology, bringing the two into dialogue can provide a superb introduction to the questions central to their shared philosophical and pedagogical project. Like Plato's Socrates in *Republic* VII, MacIntyre and Strauss are committed to a kind of teaching that is protreptic in a way that leads not to discipleship but towards further and better prohairetic enquiry.

My goal in this essay is to show that Leo Strauss and Alasdair MacIntyre, two of the most important critics of modernity, share, in spite of their very real differences, a common project: the interpretive revival of the voices of Plato and Aristotle to formulate, for modern purposes, a zetetic or sceptical framework for ethical and political critique that is neither relativistic nor dogmatic, and that cannot be achieved on the basis of mainstream modern moral and political philosophy. Both MacIntyre and Strauss hold that interpreting and reformulating ancient practical philosophy can lead to a more accurate understanding of the possibilities and problems of our modern world, and hence supply a better preparation for an active life in that world than any modern alternative. The paper is divided into four parts. The first concerns what MacIntyre and Strauss

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take from ancient Greek theory, especially Aristotelian theory; the second concerns their shared focus on *prohairesis* or thoughtful choice as a central component of the human good; the third concerns their attitude towards contemporary politics, especially democratic politics; and the last concerns their devotion to the *practice*, in MacIntyre's sense, of liberal education.¹ While I consider both MacIntyre and Strauss, my discussion will focus on MacIntyre — because I consider myself a Straussian, and because I think *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* is worth reading and thinking through, in relation to Strauss and on its own.²

I. The Theoretical Basis of Political Philosophy: Strauss, MacIntyre, and Aristotle's Species Teleology

Michael and Catherine Zuckert point out that Strauss is more a Platonist or Socratic than an Aristotelian, and on the whole, their treatment of Strauss is an outstanding introduction to his work, as is their 2014 book on Strauss.³ They are also persuasive in noting that MacIntyre does argue, in *ECM*,⁴ that a flourishing human life can in some cases be *both* philosophical and religious without any recognition of a tension between philosophy and religion, clashing on this point with Strauss's repeated insistence that leading a good human life, or at least a good life in 'Western' society, requires awareness of an irremediable tension between the philosophic life Socratically understood and a life devoted to Biblical religion, between Athens and Jerusalem.⁵ For MacIntyre, it is perfectly possible for individuals, whether philosophers or those he calls without condescension 'plain persons', to practice both religion and philosophy without seeing the two activities as fundamentally opposed ways of life.⁶

¹ For MacIntyre's definition of 'practice', see his *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edn. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 187; hereafter *AV*.

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); hereafter *ECM*.

³ Michael Zuckert and Catherine Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), especially Chapter 6.

⁴ Cathetine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert, 'Alasdair MacIntyre and Leo Strauss' (unpublished paper).

⁵ 'So, philosophy in its original and full sense is, then, certainly incompatible with the Biblical way of life', Strauss, 'Progress or Return?', in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 227-270 at 260.

⁶ MacIntyre characterizes 'plain persons' in *ECM* as those individuals who have not had the questionable advantage of having been educated in modern departmental philosophy. This is like Strauss's claim that we moderns need first to exit the cave, constructed by modern theory, beneath Plato's cave. Chapter 4 of *ECM* is devoted to an account of how Aristotelian ethical and political

On the other hand, I do not think his argument for the compatibility of philosophic life and religious practice is an attempt to set out a transcendent synthesis or amalgam of Athens and Jerusalem. It seems to me that there is much more agreement between Strauss and MacIntyre, not only in their critique of modernity but also in their understanding of the character of human flourishing. To understand MacIntyre's position here—endorsing compatibility but rejecting synthesis—it is necessary to pay more attention to the fundamental change of course in MacIntyre's moral philosophy, a change beginning with *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999) and fully developed in *ECM* (2016).⁷ The result of this turn, I suggest, is to deepen and strengthen the specifically Aristotelian character of MacIntyre's work far beyond his endorsement of a morality of the virtues in the first two editions of *AV* (1981 and 1984), and to lessen the split between his Aristotelianism and his Christianity. MacIntyre himself acknowledges this distinctive new route in the third edition of *AV* (2007) as well as in *DRA*. The change was based on his Aristotelian recognition that 'my attempt to provide an account of the human good purely in social terms in terms of practices, traditions, and the narrative unity of human lives, was bound to be inadequate until I had provided' a theoretical basis that was both metaphysical and biological, where 'metaphysics' refers to a theoretical understanding of the whole of being, and 'biology' refers to a theory of the particular character of living beings.⁸ MacIntyre adopts Aristotle's pluralist metaphysical view that reality is neither a single uniform kind of substance or being (as for Parmenides) nor a law-regulated system of individual events in motion (as for Heraclitus).⁹ Instead, nature is composed of specific kinds of beings, some living (and to that extent self-acting, rather than mere effects of underlying material/efficient causes) and some not. The theoretical and biological task MacIntyre as an Aristotelian now sets himself (starting in *DRA*) is to give a plausible account of the special work

theory can help contemporary thoughtful and active 'plain persons' overcome the powerful distorting and self-contradictory lenses of modern theory-generated orthodoxy and so become better able to live flourishing lives under modern conditions.

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999); hereafter *DRA*.

⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Preface'. See also MacIntyre, *DRA*, 'Prologue'.

⁹ Strauss attributes this distinctive metaphysical pluralism to Socrates, rejecting Cicero's characterization of him as having brought philosophy down from the heavens onto earth: 'Socrates is distinguished from all philosophers who preceded him by the fact that he sees the core of the whole, or of nature, in noetic heterogeneity'. Strauss, 'The Problem of Socrates', in Strauss, *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 103-183, at 142.

(*ergon*) of the human species—what we as humans need in order to live flourishing lives. Without such a theoretical basis, he cannot give an adequate account of ‘why human beings need the virtues’, the subtitle of *DRA*, and to that extent his pre-*DRA* practical philosophy, as he now sees it, is insufficiently plausible as a theoretical basis both for his account of human virtues and vices and for his critique of the weakness of the major brands of modern moral philosophy. What MacIntyre now requires is an answer to the *why* question, something ruled out by anti-teleological modern science and generally rejected as obsolete by modern philosophy.

The central concept of MacIntyre’s Aristotelian account is not human virtues, but human *eudaimonia*, flourishing. He makes it clear in *ECM* that he is no more a virtue ethicist than he is a communitarian; he sees recent virtue ethics as just one more brand of modern Morality (with a capital ‘M’) rather than a genuine NeoAristotelianism.¹⁰ Human virtues are not, for the Aristotelian MacIntyre, absolutely desirable characteristics or ends in themselves, but learned and then appropriated character traits that tend to contribute to the achievement of human *eudaimonia* or a flourishing human life—similarly, vices are those acquired traits that are to be avoided because they tend to block the path towards *eudaimonia*. MacIntyre notes the sharp difference between Aristotelian *eudaimonia* as the objective final cause of human species life and the prevailing modern conception of ‘happiness’ as the subjective condition of having one’s preferences satisfied: Aristotelian *eudaimonia* is not a condition of self-satisfaction but a starting point for self-criticism, for an examined life.¹¹ As MacIntyre says, there are times when achieving *eudaimonia* absolutely requires unhappiness and dissatisfaction.

To be sure, the later MacIntyre refers to himself not simply as an Aristotelian but as a ‘NeoAristotelian Thomist’, and so the Zuckerts conclude, I think misleadingly, that MacIntyre’s goal is to argue for what they call a ‘synthesis’ or ‘amalgam’ of Aristotelian and Christian world views.¹² My contention is that MacIntyre, in *ECM*, advocates neither a Straussian tension between ancient Greek philosophy and Biblical religion, nor a blending of these two ways of life. The essence of MacIntyre’s ‘third way’ can be found in the rich and memorable last sentences of *ECM*:

¹⁰ MacIntyre, *ECM*, 66.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹² Zuckert and Zuckert, ‘MacIntyre and Strauss’, 8 and 11-12.

The perfection and completion of a life consists in an agent's having persisted in moving towards the best goods of which she or he knows. So there is presupposed some further good, an object of desire beyond all particular and finite goods, a good towards which desire tends insofar as it remains unsatisfied by even the most desirable of finite goods, as in good lives it does. But here the enquiries of politics and ethics end. Here *natural* theology begins.¹³

Far from separating Biblical or revealed theology from autonomous theoretical insight, MacIntyre articulates a sense of the relationship between the human good and the good simply that is shared by the pagan polytheist Aristotle,¹⁴ by the Christian Aristotelian Thomas Aquinas, by the Catholic Aristotelian Alasdair MacIntyre, and I suggest, by Plato and the Jewish Platonist Leo Strauss as well. Strauss and MacIntyre both adopt eudaimonism as a central aspect of their central project, namely, articulating a way of responding to what they see as modern philosophy's theoretically incoherent and practically corrupting embrace of two horns of a dilemma, which Strauss names positivism and historicism (or 'decisionism', the groundless love of commitment to which historicism can give rise) and MacIntyre calls, in *ECM*, utilitarianism, or economism, on the one hand, and NeoKantian Morality with a capital 'M' on the other.¹⁵

While MacIntyre is, he says, a 'NeoAristotelian Thomist', Strauss is not properly an Aristotelian at all, but more a Platonist or a Socratic than an Aristotelian. Nevertheless, especially in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss draws explicit attention to what Plato and Aristotle have in common as distinct from not only modern political philosophy but from the Stoics and Aquinas as well, especially in his assertion that for both Plato and Aristotle there *is* a rank order of human goods, but that this order cannot be converted into a series of natural laws telling actors what must be done in such and such circumstances. The appropriate balance of goods must be determined not by *theôria* but by *phronêsis* and contextual judgment—the partial incommensurability of human goods (*Politics* III.12, 1282b-1283a) leads to a necessary imprecision in

¹³ MacIntyre, *ECM*, 315, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Particularly in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.7, esp. 1141a20-22 ('It would be strange if someone thinks that the political art or *phronêsis* is the most serious intellectual virtue if humans are not the best beings in the cosmos'); *ibid.*, X.6-8; and Aristotle, *Politics*, VII.3, 1325b16-32.

¹⁵ On "Morality", see MacIntyre, *ECM*, 114-116. MacIntyre borrows this concept from Bernard Williams's radical dismissal of modern moral philosophy, see *ibid.*, 151.

theorizing the human good, on account of which any assertion of greater theoretical precision would be empirically inaccurate and misleading as a guide to practice.¹⁶ Contra MacIntyre's Thomism, Strauss insists that this Aristotelian incommensurability is incompatible with Thomist natural law, a critique of Aquinas MacIntyre implicitly rejects in his view of the normatively 'negative' and open character of Aquinas's natural law. MacIntyre goes so far as to imply that Aristotle would accept a Thomistic natural law doctrine,¹⁷ one that adopts 'the authority of the precepts of the natural law, precepts that prohibit one from getting one's way by fraud or force'.¹⁸ His final statement, in *ECM*, on Thomist natural law explicitly asserts, contra Strauss in *NRH*, its flexibility: 'The negative prohibitions of the precepts of natural law, as I stressed earlier, by telling us only what not to do, characteristically leave open a range of possibilities'.¹⁹ Nonetheless, he also stresses throughout the importance of Thomistic natural laws teaching us that there are some things one must never do, some desires we must never act on, no matter what the circumstances, for the development of virtues and an appropriate sense of the need for self-critical reflection.²⁰ In *DRA*, MacIntyre argues that the 'precepts' as well as the rules of Thomist natural law 'enjoin us to do whatever the virtues require of us'. But as with the virtues, we must at some point ask the theoretical question why we should do what the natural laws and virtues require? MacIntyre says that the 'sufficient answer' to that question is not that we should obey because God requires it of us, but because it is 'only through the acquisition and exercise of the virtues that individuals and communities can flourish in a specifically human mode'.²¹

In *ECM*, moreover, MacIntyre is very clear that a truly exemplary life, such as that of Father Denis Faul, must be able to go beyond pious obedience to traditional practice and doctrine, especially in difficult

¹⁶ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 162; hereafter *NRH*.

¹⁷ Criticizing the NeoKantian proponents of modern Morality, MacIntyre says 'there is no place within their conceptual scheme for such Aristotelian and Thomistic notions as those of an end, a common good, or the natural law'. MacIntyre, *ECM*, 98.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 178. Strauss recognizes the difference concerning natural law between Plato and Aristotle on the one hand and the Stoics on the other. Strauss, 'Natural Law', in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 137-146, at 141.

¹⁹ MacIntyre, *ECM*, 312.

²⁰ And not only *self-critique*: '[I]nsofar as plain persons understand what at the level of everyday practice the virtues require of them, they are also able to understand what the virtues require of their rulers ... The consideration of what rationality requires of rulers and ruled becomes a prologue to radical social critique'. MacIntyre, *ECM*, 89.

²¹ MacIntyre, *DRA*, 111-112.

times.²² As his four exemplary lives in *ECM* make clear, MacIntyre is not committed to the view that adherence and obedience to any religious doctrine is either necessary or sufficient for living a flourishing human life. His Thomism is best understood as a specific kind of *NeoAristotelianism*, not as an alternative to Aristotelianism. That is, the voice that speaks to us in *ECM* is more fundamentally Aristotelian than Thomist. It is worth noting that although MacIntyre says he will avoid entering into interpretive disputes about Aquinas, when he talks about what someone must do in order to think well about the relationship between their desires and their judgments, they ‘will have to reckon with the theoretical claims of those who have most adequately spelled out those presuppositions, Aristotle and such Aristotelians as Ibn Roschd [Averroes], Maimonides, and Aquinas’.²³ This suggests that the Zuckerts have overestimated the extent to which MacIntyre wants to effect a synthesis between the philosopher Aristotle and the theologian Aquinas, rather than seeing Aquinas as a particular kind of Aristotelian philosopher, one who, like Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.6-8, *Pol.* VII.3, and *Metaphysics* XII.8-10, is open to the need for *natural* (that is, not Biblical or revealed) theology in order to understand the *human* good.

Strauss seems to set himself at odds with MacIntyre in holding that Aristotle’s teleological account of nature has been superseded by modern natural science, and so because of its incompatibility with modern natural science cannot serve as an objective basis or orientation for developing political philosophy—according to both Strauss and Strauss’s Aristotle, these two kinds of theorizing, natural science and political philosophy, must be kept separate.²⁴ Perhaps, as Kelvin Knight argues, Strauss’s account of Aristotle’s *Politics* in *City and Man* is closer to Heidegger than it is to MacIntyre’s Aristotle—especially given MacIntyre’s retraction of his critique of Aristotle’s ‘metaphysical’ biology and his

²² Speaking of Father Faul and other Irish priests who participated in the Civil Rights movement in Northern Ireland beginning in the 1960s, MacIntyre says this: ‘Were these priests acting as they did only because as Catholic priests they identified with the Catholic community and abhorred wrongs done to it? The answer has to be that they certainly saw themselves as having pastoral concerns for their own community. But what was overridingly important to them was their shared underlying commitment to a generally Thomistic conception of justice *that could be justified in secular terms* and that required impartiality’. MacIntyre, *ECM*, 300-301, emphasis added.

²³ MacIntyre, *ECM*, 55. This list strikingly opens questions about MacIntyre’s reading of Aquinas, and not only in relation to Strauss, who holds that Aquinas is much more dogmatic than either Averroes or Maimonides.

²⁴ Strauss, *NRH*, 7-8; Kelvin Knight, *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 91.

argument about the present intellectual viability and function of Aristotle's species teleology in *ECM*.²⁵ For MacIntyre, as for various others, starting perhaps with Stephen R. L. Clark, it is not the case that Aristotle's empirical potentiality/actuality species developmental teleology is ruled out either by modern biological science or by modern medical/psychological practice.²⁶ Perhaps Strauss assumes that modern science (and especially modern biology) conforms more closely than it does to the reductionist anti-teleological account of nature assumed by modern philosophy from Hobbes (there is nothing but nature, and in nature nothing moves itself—this is Galileo's law of inertia)²⁷ through Kant (nature is a 'heteronomy of efficient causality')²⁸ to Hegel and Marx (nature as the realm of predictable necessity as opposed to human history, which is the realm of freedom).²⁹

Nathan Pinkoski helps clarify this key disagreement about the present-day relevance of Aristotle's species-teleological biology.³⁰ According to Pinkoski, for Strauss, modern positivism and historicism undermine political philosophy, and should be countered by a turn towards Plato and Aristotle. What is the content of this Straussian turn? Strauss provides an explicit though ambiguous answer to this question in a brief passage in his Introduction to *Natural Right and History*.³¹ In ruling out

²⁵ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964).

²⁶ Stephen Clark, *Aristotle's Man: Speculations Upon Aristotelian Anthropology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). Clark's reading of Aristotle's biology as compatible with modern science was reinforced a few years later by Martha Nussbaum's *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium: Texts with Translation, Commentary and Interpretive Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1978). Nussbaum has since abandoned her commitment to Aristotelian species teleology as a basis for political philosophy because it is too controversial, and thus inappropriate for theorizing, like her own, that attempts to emulate Rawlsian 'political liberalism' in its appeal to a universally acceptable ground. See Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011). Others, however, have continued to argue for the compatibility of Aristotelian species (as opposed to cosmic) teleology and modern science. For overviews, see Monte Ransome Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), Chapter 10; Kevin Cherry, *Plato, Aristotle, and the Purpose of Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 183-190. For a recent work in Clark's tradition of Aristotle interpretation, see Stephen Salkever 'Aristotelian *Phronēsis*, the Discourse of Human Rights, and Contemporary Global Practice', *POLIS: The Journal for Ancient Greek Political Thought* 33:1 (2016), 7-30.

²⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 106-244.

²⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Mary Gregor trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1997), 52.

²⁹ For Strauss, 'science is the only intellectual pursuit which today successfully can claim to be the perfection of the human understanding'. Strauss, 'Progress or Return?', 261.

³⁰ Nathan Pinkoski, *Postmodern Aristotles: Arendt, Strauss, MacIntyre and the Recovery of Political Philosophy*, D.Phil. dissertation, Oxford University, 2017, 153-154.

³¹ Strauss, *NRH*, 7-8.

a turn to Aristotle's non-reductive biological naturalism, Strauss seems *either* to accept the characteristically modern opinion that modern physical science has made Aristotle's species teleology unacceptable as an objective point of departure, *or* only to reject the possibility of biological metaphysical certainty as a ground for moral and political philosophy.³² I am persuaded by the former reading because Strauss proposes explicitly and without much ambiguity in *City and Man* that the ground for Aristotelian practical philosophy must be a kind of pre-scientific intersubjective knowledge of the political phenomena themselves (not unlike a Husserlian lifeworld),³³ a kind of common-sense knowledge articulated by Aristotle, according to Strauss, in the *Politics*³⁴—in this respect, Strauss' un-Aristotelian use of Aristotle resembles Heidegger's (and Hannah Arendt's). But for Strauss, unlike Heidegger and Arendt, the pre-scientific understanding of the political and human things *can* serve as an objective basis for natural right as understood by Plato and Aristotle, though not for any inflexibly dispositive natural law. Still, on this crucial point about the relation of biology and politics, MacIntyre is Aristotelian and Strauss *NeoAristotelian*. My account of Strauss is reinforced by his claim, in a letter to Alexandre Kojève, about the key difference between Plato and Aristotle:

The difference between Plato and Aristotle is that Aristotle believes that biology, as a mediation between knowledge of the inanimate and knowledge of man is available, *or*

³² Perhaps the best guide to the puzzle of *NRH*'s Introduction is the story recounted by first-generation Straussian Laurence Berns: 'In his last years during a Plato's *Laws* course he was giving at St. John's a student asked him, "If you could speak now to Plato and Aristotle, what would you ask them?" Strauss paused to gather his thoughts and then said, "I think I would ask them whether the development from Galileo and Newton would cause them in any way to modify their teaching about the forms." He evidently did not think it would be a reasonable expenditure of his powers and time to pursue that subject in detail'. Laurence Berns with Eva Brann, 'Leo Strauss at St. John's College (Annapolis)', in *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime*, eds. Kenneth Deutsch and John Murley (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 31-37, at 34.

³³ See Zuckert and Zuckert, 'MacIntyre and Strauss', 14.

³⁴ Speaking of Aristotle's approach to political things in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, Strauss says this: 'One may say that he remains within the limits of an unwritten *nomos* which is recognized by well-bred people everywhere. This *nomos* may be in agreement with reason but it is not as such dictated by reason. It constitutes the sphere of human or political things by being its limit or its ceiling'. Strauss, *City and Man*, 26. Strauss's position here, insofar as he adopts what he takes to be Aristotle's approach, may owe more to modern phenomenology than to ancient philosophy—at least, according an earlier Straussian insight: 'The division of philosophy into natural philosophy and human philosophy is based on the systematic distinction between man and the world, which Bacon makes in express controversy against ancient philosophy' Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (University of Chicago Press, 1952), 91-92.

Aristotle believes in the availability of universal teleology,
if not of the simplistic kind sketched in *Phaedo* 96.³⁵

It is interesting to note that a genuine Aristotelian turn to species teleology as a superior ground for modern ethics and politics (and for modern biology) is explicitly carried out not by Strauss but by Strauss's friend and fellow student of Heidegger, Hans Jonas.³⁶

MacIntyre's account of species, including the human species, is, by contrast with Strauss, explicitly in accord with evolutionary biology and, in his view, in accord with Aristotelian (including Thomist) ethics as well: 'Species emerge by natural selection in particular types of environment'.³⁷ The key word here is 'emerge': species are emergent properties of certain kinds of living things, properties that are inseparable from but not reducible to their material composition. And as such '[i]t is not too difficult to rewrite Aristotle's arguments about the need for the *polis* (Aristotle, *Politics* I, 1253a1-19) in contemporary terms'.³⁸ MacIntyre explains the implications of this, and the difference between humans and other animals, in ways compatible with both Aristotelian teleology and modern biology throughout Chapter 4, section II of *ECM*, which is perhaps the centrepiece of MacIntyre's theoretical defence of his NeoThomistic or NeoAristotelian emergentism:

My claim is, then, that human beings have distinguished themselves from other animal species by realizing possibilities that cannot be accounted for solely in

³⁵ Leo Strauss, 'Letter from Leo Strauss to Alexandre Kojève, May 28, 1957 (written in English)', in *On Tyranny*, revised and expanded edition, eds. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth, (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 276-280 at 277, emphasis added.

³⁶ Jonas first criticizes the anti-teleological dogma of modern science from the 17th century onward as an *a priori* assertion stemming from the belief that all being, whether living or not, is matter in law-like motion, rather than from any empirical induction, in Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 34. On the basis of this critique of modern biology for its unempirical erasure of the Aristotelian distinction between living and non-living phenomena, Jonas goes on to develop a new question: 'We opened this volume with the proposition that the philosophy of life comprises the philosophy of organism and the philosophy of mind. At its end, and in light of what we have learned we may add a further proposition, implied in that first one but setting a new task: a philosophy of mind comprises ethics—and through the continuity of mind with organism and of organism with nature, ethics becomes part of the philosophy of nature'. *Ibid.*, 282. I think this is the Aristotelian path that MacIntyre takes but Strauss does not.

³⁷ MacIntyre, *ECM*, 225.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 224. Mariska Leunissen does precisely this in 'Biology and Teleology in Aristotle's Account of The City', in *Teleology in the Ancient World: Philosophical and Medical Approaches*, ed. Julius Rocca, (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 107-124.

[reductionist] evolutionary terms and that what they have realized is a determinate form of life, participation in which requires a grasp of and an ability to find application for the concept of a good, the concept of a reason, and a number of closely related concepts. . . . Part of what makes them distinctive, however, is the ways in which they can be educated and their exercise criticized.³⁹

Similarly, for MacIntyre, Aristotle more than any other philosopher recognizes the continuity that links human and non-human animals: ‘no philosopher has taken human animality more seriously’.⁴⁰ Thus MacIntyre, at least since *DRA*, is much more concerned with the relevance of biological enquiry to moral and political philosophy than is Strauss. MacIntyre thus implies, as Strauss does not, that Aristotle’s political philosophy would be falsified if his empirical species teleological understanding of human beings and of the human *ergon* turns out to be mistaken. Nonetheless, as I hope to make clear in the rest of this essay, the points of agreement between MacIntyre and Strauss are considerably more important than their disagreements. And even where they appear to disagree, as in the case of the theoretical status of Aristotle’s species teleology, bringing the two into dialogue can provide a superb introduction to the questions central to their shared philosophical and pedagogical project.

II. Human Eudaimonia: Prohairesis As Necessary But Not Sufficient Condition For Human Flourishing

For Aristotle, what distinguishes us from other species is twofold: Our specific biological inheritance supplies a vastly wider range of possibilities, and our ways of life and our communities are criticizable in terms of an idea of the human *ergon*—of the kind of work we must do in order to flourish. For MacIntyre as for Aristotle (and for, MacIntyre says, ‘any Aristotelian view, Neo or otherwise’) the name for that specific human work is *prohairesis*, an integration of rational judgment and desire or longing (*orexis*).⁴¹ What MacIntyre *adds* to these notions of practices

³⁹ MacIntyre, *ECM*, 226.

⁴⁰ MacIntyre, *DRA*, 5.

⁴¹ As MacIntyre says, *prohairesis* ‘often, but misleadingly translated by ‘choice’. MacIntyre, *ECM*, 38. On *prohairesis*, see also *ibid.*, 39, 51, and 190. See *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.2 and II.4, and

and narratives in *DRA* and *ECM* is an additional Aristotelian layer of objective self-critique, one that requires us to reflect on our practices and the part they play in our lives as a whole—asking ourselves the Aristotelian question about the human *ergon* (according to nature, not convention or narrative) in relation to the particular context of our own lives. This argument about the questions we must as human beings ask of ourselves if we are to have good reasons for wanting what we want, is, like Aristotle's, both biological and metaphysical, though not in any objectionably dogmatic way, and it is indispensable if we are to become adequate practical reasoners, beings aware of both our potential rationality and our potential dependence on others.⁴² In *ECM*, MacIntyre not only adopts Aristotle's question as essential to his own enquiry, but also Aristotle's answer to the question of the human *ergon*: that a flourishing human life *must* be a prohairesis life (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.2; Aristotle, *Pol.*, III.9): 'Prohairesis is either understanding (*nous*) combined with desire (*orexis*) or desire combined with thought (*dianoia*); and what originates [movement] in this way is a human being (*anthrôpos*)' (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.2, 1139b4-5; see also *Pol.*, III.9, 1280a33-34). Any flourishing life must be a prohairesis life, as noted above, and MacIntyre is careful to note that *prohairesis* must not be translated (as it all too often is) by 'choice' or 'free agency'. The human *ergon* is not free agency, which is possessed by a number of other living species as well as by immature human beings, but thoughtful choice that results in action: 'for both children and other animals share in what is voluntary but not in *prohairesis*' (*Nicomachean Ethics*, III.2, 1111b). Nor is *prohairesis* purely rational choice free from the influence of desire. It may not be an exaggeration to characterize MacIntyre's central project as an elaboration of Aristotle's conception of the prohairesis life as the heart of human *eudaimonia*. I would go so far as to say that this idea, though not explicit in Strauss, also makes sense as a Straussian understanding of human flourishing understood in strictly human—that is, not transcendent—terms.

But MacIntyre recognizes a central Aristotelian complexity concerning the prohairesis life, namely that prohairesis lives can be vicious as well as

Politics III.8. *Prohairesis* is most fully explained in *Eudemian Ethics* II. 9, 1227a3-5, where Aristotle speaks of it as more than the sum of wish plus belief: 'As for *prohairesis*, it is neither simply wish nor simply opinion, but opinion and desire [or, better, 'longing', *orexis*] when these follow as a conclusion of deliberation'.

⁴² It is metaphysical in the sense of being universal, based on a view concerning the truth about the whole of which human life is a part, but *not* metaphysical in the sense of *a priori* rather than empirical.

virtuous, because there is no way to guarantee that our thoughtful choices will also be correct ones. This caution is repeated on several occasions in *Nicomachean Ethics* VII: unlike people who lack self-restraint, vicious people thoughtfully choose their vices, not recognizing their choices as vicious. The Aristotelian MacIntyre recognizes that while *prohairesis* is a necessary condition of a well-lived human life, it is not a sufficient one, since prohairetic lives can be vicious as well as virtuous.⁴³

What, for Aristotle, can correct for the unreliability of *prohairesis*? Aristotle gives no final solution to this essential human *aporia*, but the final three chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics* provide substantial suggestions. The first and perhaps most fully elaborated proposal is Aristotle's discussion of the way friendships of various kinds, but especially virtue friendships, friendships in which the essential or defining activity is neither material self-interest nor a variety of pleasures, but serious *logos* about how we are living our lives (*Nicomachean Ethics* IX. 9, 1170b5-19), can help correct prohairetic vices, as can participation in the activities of what MacIntyre calls practices, and in the public life of relatively just communities and traditions. Another and perhaps the best preventive is participation in what Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.6-8 calls the contemplative or theoretical life, what MacIntyre calls natural theology, and what Strauss calls the philosophical life. Such participation is an important guard against the human capacity for embracing mistaken though fully deliberative conclusions. Helping MacIntyre's 'plain persons' (that is, all human beings) see and value such participation in *theôria* is perhaps the greatest assistance that Aristotelian theory and, for MacIntyre and Strauss, modern liberal education can provide to *phronêsis*.

Where then does Aristotle, for MacIntyre, go wrong, and in what way can Aquinas rescue him from the mistakes in his political and moral philosophy? MacIntyre thinks these errors stem from Aristotle's weakness in not being able to fully separate himself from the prejudices of his age, and that these errors threaten not only to make Aristotle's philosophizing irrelevant to the majority of humankind and to the modern world as such, but to render his philosophizing self-contradictory and incoherent. What are Aristotle's theoretical errors, and how can they be corrected? First,

⁴³ 'Lack of self-restraint (*akrasia*) is contrary to one's *prohairesis*, vice (*kakia*) is according to one's *prohairesis*'. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII. 8. 1151a5-7. In addition to the discussion in *Nicomachean Ethics* VII, Aristotle reminds us in *Politics* II.7, 1266b35-38 that education and *prohairesis* can go badly astray: 'even if everyone receives the same education, it may lead them to thoughtfully choose greed (*prohairetikoi pleonexia*), of either money or honor, or both'.

according to MacIntyre, Aristotle, in *Politics* I, errs by contradicting his own accurate understanding of the human *ergon* as *prohairesis* by claiming that some human beings are slaves by nature, and that women are incapable of controlling their desire by *logos*.⁴⁴ Secondly, Aristotle wrongly praises the great-souled or magnanimous man, the *megalopsuchos*, for exhibiting the highest form of moral virtue and human self-sufficiency (*Nicomachean Ethics*, IV.3). How can we rescue Aristotle from his own serious theoretical weaknesses? By reading him through Aquinas's 'recovery' of Aristotle from his context. The major contribution Aquinas can make to rehabilitating Aristotle is by showing that human virtues must reflect the necessary dependence of human beings on one another. Key to this rehabilitation is the recognition of *miseriordia*⁴⁵—which Aquinas recognizes as a secular virtue, and not only a theological one.⁴⁶ Thus it is not, for MacIntyre, something Aquinas imports into secular philosophy from revealed religion. For MacIntyre, Aristotelians, to be coherent, must incorporate *miseriordia* as a secular virtue necessary to support Aristotle's recognition of our dependence on one another as political animals. An acknowledgement of such dependence requires something like this virtue, especially as an antidote to the illusion of self-sufficiency exhibited by the *megalopsuchos*, 'an illusion apparently shared by Aristotle, that is all too characteristic of the rich and powerful in many times and places'.⁴⁷ Thus, for MacIntyre, these Thomist thoughts are necessary to save Aristotle from his own Periclean Athenian illusions. But at the same time, MacIntyre makes it quite clear that he is *not* bringing in a new non-Aristotelian Biblical orientation to correct Aristotle:

Nonetheless when we try to remedy this injury to moral philosophy, it will turn out, so I shall be suggesting, that we have to draw to a quite remarkable extent upon Aristotle's concepts, theses and arguments. Even though Aristotle and some Aristotelians have positions against which it is important to argue, it was Aristotle who provided the best resources that we as yet have for identifying what is mistaken in those positions and how

⁴⁴ MacIntyre, *ECM*, 86-87.

⁴⁵ '*Miseriordia* is grief or sorrow over someone else's distress, says Aquinas, just insofar as one understands the other's distress as one's own'. MacIntyre, *DRA*, 125. See also MacIntyre's discussion of the 'peculiar importance' of the virtue of humility. MacIntyre, *ECM*, 113.

⁴⁶ MacIntyre, *DRA*, 124.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

those mistakes should be corrected. So at certain points
I will be turning Aristotle against Aristotle, sometimes
with the aid of Aquinas.⁴⁸

For MacIntyre, both he and Aquinas, as secular moral and political philosophers, are Aristotelian critics of Aristotle, not philosophers attempting to create a new synthesis of Greek philosophy and revealed religion.⁴⁹

In *ECM* 4.II, MacIntyre brings up a third vital though less obvious weakness (less obvious than Aristotle's prejudices about slaves, women, and non-Greek foreigners, and his admiration for great-souled men) in Aristotle's account of human *eudaimonia* that also calls for help from Aquinas. This concerns the idea that rational human agents will be aware of 'the directedness of their lives towards an end that cannot be identified with any finite and particular end'.⁵⁰ Strauss and MacIntyre hold similar views on Aristotle's sense of the incompleteness of the *human* good and the ethical/political life, and the need to go beyond it in the direction of *theôria*, or the philosophical life. As mentioned above, MacIntyre ends *ECM* with a call to recognize the need to complete a well-lived human life with a less than precise sense of a way of life that transcends humanity.⁵¹ This recognition requires a sense of something like a god, but not necessarily a god who commands or otherwise evokes our obedience. MacIntyre makes this point in an interview with Giovanna Borradori, where he says that he 'learned from Aristotelianism how to understand aright the relation of philosophical argument to theological inquiry. My philosophy, like that of many other Aristotelians, is theistic; but it is as

⁴⁸ MacIntyre, *DRA*, 7-8.

⁴⁹ This is not the place to quarrel with MacIntyre's interpretations of Aristotle, but it is, I think, important to note that many recent commentators reject traditional readings of Aristotle as pro-slavery, misogynist, ethnocentric, and devoted to the magnanimous man as the peak of the virtues, readings MacIntyre accepts as accurate without mention of these counter-traditional readings in any way. Such readings see Aristotle as *problematizing* standard ancient Greek prejudices (*endoxa*) rather than reinforcing them. See, for example, Adriel Trott, *Aristotle on the Nature of Community* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 175-213. These newer views are summarized: Stephen Salkever, 'Aristotelian *Phronêsis*' and in 'Reading Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* as a Single Course of Lectures: Rhetoric, Politics, and Philosophy', in *Cambridge Companion to Ancient Greek Political Thought*, ed. Stephen Salkever, (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 209-242.

⁵⁰ MacIntyre, *ECM*, 230.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 315.

secular in its content as any other’⁵² This sounds not unlike the Aristotelian *theos*, described as follows in *Eudamian Ethics*, VIII, 1249b13-15: ‘For the god (*ho theos*) is not a commander in a sense of giving orders but as that for the sake of which practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) gives orders’. MacIntyre makes a similar point in *ECM* 4.11, where he asserts the necessary incompleteness of all human lives for Aquinas, an incompleteness that does *not* require resolution via a conception of a pious or quasi-divine life:

It may seem paradoxical, but it is not, to express that insight by saying that on his [Aquinas’s] view we complete and perfect our lives by allowing them to remain incomplete. A good life is one in which an agent, although continuing to rank order particular and finite goods, treats none of these goods as necessary for the completion of his or her life, so leaving her or himself open to a final good beyond all such goods, a good desirable beyond all such goods. Defective lives are those in which agents either mistakenly identify some particular finite goods that they have achieved or will achieve as their final good or suppose that failure or defeat in achieving such goods is failure to achieve their final good. *Does one have to be a theist to understand one’s life in these terms? Of course not.* Whether Aquinas is right about the presuppositions of such a life is one thing. What the character of such a life is is quite another.⁵³

This strikes me as very like Aristotle in its recognition of a life that is both open to us and yet beyond us, the theoretical life, a life that involves ‘spending time with the immortal things (*athanatizein*)’ (*Nicomachean Ethics*, X.7, 1177b33. See also *ibid.*, VI.7; Aristotle, *Pol.*, VII.2-3; and Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, I.5.)—although MacIntyre says, I think misleadingly, that Aristotle rules out the possibility that a life may be *eudaimôn* yet not complete.⁵⁴ However that may be, it is certainly the case

⁵² Giovanni Borradori and Rosanna Crocitto, interviewing Alisdair MacIntyre, in *The American Philosopher: Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, Kuhn*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 266.

⁵³ MacIntyre, *ECM*, 231, emphasis added.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 229-230. Ralph McInerney, whom MacIntyre cites with approval, *ibid.*, 209 n.18, as supporting the view that Aquinas is an Aristotelian with respect to the centrality of knowledge of the human *ergon* to knowing the human good, says the following: ‘In saying that perfect happiness is impossible in this life, Thomas is underscoring the discrepancy Aristotle saw between his

that Strauss, following Plato, is fully in agreement with this idea of the essential incompleteness of a well-lived human life.

In summary, in addition to their shared metaphysical pluralism and practical eudaimonism, Strauss and MacIntyre are in agreement on three central points about what a good practical theory, and a good community, must provide:

- 1) It must make it clear that a flourishing human life has to be a prohairetic life, one informed by frequent and life-long deliberation about our desires, goals, and associations. Other somatic and external goods are of course necessary, but to flourish as a human being *prohairesis* is indispensable, explicitly for MacIntyre, implicitly for Strauss. Both Strauss and MacIntyre hold this view, though MacIntyre's Aristotelian species teleology, his non-reductionist biology, especially in *DRA* and *ECM*, means that he is clearer and stronger on this point than the Socratic and phenomenological Strauss.
- 2) A good theory must also indicate the *limits* of the prohairetic life, and therefore to insist paradoxically on the human need to reach *beyond* the human good in order best to achieve that human good. This is a central theme in Strauss's writings on Plato and elsewhere, while MacIntyre suggests that Aristotle is not always sufficiently aware of this need and so argues that Aquinas's theorizing is required to articulate it—but Aquinas as an Aristotelian philosopher, and, like Aristotle and Plato, a *natural*, rather than a Christian, theologian.⁵⁵
- 3) In philosophy as such, there can be no last words.⁵⁶ There can be no final theory, no precise institutional model of the best community. Why? Because of the plurality and partial incommensurability of human goods, because our practical conclusions must always be made relative to context, and

definition of happiness and what we can hope to achieve of it. That Thomas does and Aristotle does not speak of a perfect happiness after this life does not affect their concord on earthly happiness'. Ralph McInerney, *Aquinas on Human Action: A Theory of Practice* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 176.

⁵⁵ Clark comments that Aristotle 'would presumably have agreed with that doubtfully historical Indian mentioned by Aristoxenus of Tarentum, who laughed at Socrates, declaring that one could not understand the human if one knew nothing of the divine'. Clark, *Aristotle's Man*, 19.

⁵⁶ See Alasdair MacIntyre, 'On Not Having the Last Word', in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, eds. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsperg, and Jens Kertscher, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 157-172.

because of our human need to recognize and reflect on the presence of a good more attractive, more fully active, than the human good. The great problem for both good theory and a good society is to make this openness evident without lapsing into positivism or moral relativism. MacIntyre says this: ‘even if we acknowledge that all philosophical enquiry is from some particular historically conditional standpoint with its own perspective, we are not only able to judge but compelled to judge that some standpoints and some perspectives are rationally superior to others’.⁵⁷ Finding a mean between dogmatism and relativism in judgment and in rhetoric is the task of both theory and practice, and this is not only necessary but also very difficult. The first step is being aware of the difficulty, an awareness that is pervasive in both MacIntyre and Strauss, as well as in both Plato and Aristotle.

III. Politics, Democracy, And How To Flourish In The Modern World

Where does this kind of theorizing take us? Is it simply a kind of withdrawal from modernity’s active life, characterized as it is by practices and theories that obscure the human good, a sort of retreat to Plato’s dialogues, for Strauss, or a matter of waiting for a new and different St. Benedict, as for MacIntyre in *AV*? One alternative is to place Strauss and MacIntyre in opposing ideological camps in spite of their shared criticism of the capitalist economy and the bureaucratic state, Strauss allegedly devoted to antiquarian conservatism or right-wing nationalism, MacIntyre allegedly a traditionalist communitarian or a leftist or postMarxist revolutionary. But neither actively engaged in political advocacy; both took themselves seriously as moral and political *philosophers* and as *teachers* devoted to the practice of liberal education, rather than as political actors. Their goal is neither merely to interpret nor merely to change the world, but to interpret the human world in such a way as to strengthen the chances that this world will be changed for the better as a result of their writing and teaching, where ‘better’ is understood in terms of a Socratic or Aristotelian understanding of the human good.⁵⁸ They want to strengthen and educate the practical reason of those

⁵⁷ MacIntyre, ‘Last Word’, 162-163.

⁵⁸ In other words, they are Aristotelian practical philosophers who reject *both* the Hegelian and the Marxian options articulated in Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* 11.

MacIntyre calls plain persons, both by ‘turning the soul’ (as in Plato, *Republic* VII, 518b-d) towards our real problems and potentials with respect to *eudaimonia* and the virtues, *and* by undermining the modern theoretical fantasies that weaken our practical reason, especially our sense of the kinds of problems we, as modern human beings, need to address if we are to live as well as we possibly can.

Both critics of modernity see some value in liberal democracy—things could be better but they could also be worse: MacIntyre refers to human rights and utilitarianism as ‘socially indispensable charades’.⁵⁹ For him, appeals to fictional human rights have ‘played an important part in securing the rights of deprived and oppressed individuals and groups, just as it is true that appeals to the maxim of utility, conceived in a crude Benthamite form, have played an important part in securing benefits for those who badly needed and need them’. But at the same time, these fictions produced by modern philosophy’s doctrines of utility and rights, ‘instead of illuminating the realities with which we have to deal as rational agents’, mislead and distort and ‘more than this [have] the social function of misleading and distorting’.⁶⁰ Strauss makes it quite clear that his own rejection of liberal political theory does not entail a revolutionary or reactionary rejection of modern politics: ‘Liberal or constitutional democracy comes closer to what the classics demanded than any alternative that is viable in our age’.⁶¹ The task of MacIntyre’s and Strauss’s theorizing, and what drives their interpretation of Aristotle and Plato, is to find a better theoretical orientation than modern theory can provide through which to understand, evaluate, and respond to modern practice. They are not purveyors of utopian dreams or political programmes or of model institutional schemes that can solve our problems for us. Their project is to demonstrate the distortions of the dominant schools of modern Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment practical *philosophy*, and to show us a better way based on their encounter with Aristotle and Plato.

There is, however, a textual basis for the tendency to place Strauss on the Right and so in opposition to MacIntyre, and that is their apparent difference on the question of the value of democracy, or the rule of the people. Strauss sees in democracy as such a threat to good practice that

⁵⁹ MacIntyre, *ECM*, 77.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

⁶¹ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* (NY: The Free Press, 1991), 194. On Strauss and American politics, see Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), Chapter 7.

MacIntyre would reject—although like Strauss, MacIntyre never endorses the idea of an unlimited democracy in which the voice of the people is the uncriticizable voice of God. To what extent does this disagreement affect their recommendations for what should be done politically?

Strauss holds that Aristotle is deeply convinced that human beings are unequal. Thus, Strauss's Aristotle is radically antidemocratic, as shown by his exclusion of the *dēmos* from his sketch of the best regime.⁶² But this apparent dismissal of democracy is substantially modified by Strauss's own lectures on the meaning of modern liberal education in democratic societies in *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*.⁶³ Such a deep and pervasive anti-democratic commitment is decidedly not the case for MacIntyre's Aristotle—though MacIntyre's Aristotle *is* mistakenly committed to the view that some humans are naturally subhuman slaves, and to the view that women are imperfect humans in that they are incapable of controlling desire by practical reasoning, and so must be chastened by Aquinas to become an appropriate theoretical guide to living well in our, or any other imaginable, world. For MacIntyre, Aristotle's anti-democratic exclusions not only make him unacceptable to modern readers, but also threaten the coherence of his ethical and political philosophizing as a whole.⁶⁴

But for Strauss's Aristotle (in *City and Man* and elsewhere), the best possible *polis* is composed of 'perfect gentlemen' (*kaloikagathoi*)—whom Strauss defines as 'urban patricians whose wealth is rural, not commercial' (and inherited, not earned?).⁶⁵ Strauss's commitment to the view that in the best practicable regime power must be in the hands of a

⁶² In *City and Man*, 37, Strauss, speaking of Aristotle's sketch of his 'prayer' regime in *Politics* VII, says this: 'Aristotle devised his best polity as a city without a *dēmos*, a city consisting only of gentlemen on the one hand and metics and slaves on the other'. Strauss, *City and Man*, 37.

⁶³ Leo Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), Chapters 1 & 2. At *City and Man*, 35, Strauss says of Aristotle that 'the democracy with which he takes issue is the democracy of the city, not modern democracy or the kind of democracy which presupposes the distinction between state and society'. In this sense, Strauss acts as a good Aristotelian by responding in his own voice to the problems and possibilities of *modern* democracy, rather than to the democracies of Aristotle's time: 'Only we living today can possibly find a solution to the problems of today'. Strauss, *City and Man*, 11.

⁶⁴ MacIntyre, *ECM*, 86.

⁶⁵ Leo Strauss, *On Plato's Symposium*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 9. On that same page, Strauss says that 'the Greek word for equitable is the same as the word for gentleman'. But that is not so the *epieikēs* (generally translated 'equitable' or 'decent' person; see *Nicomachean Ethics* V.10) is quite different from the *kalosk'agathos*, much less the conventional (English) gentleman, and it is this concept of the *epieikēs*, not the idea of the *kalosk'agathos*, that is the term Aristotle uses as a stand-in for the 'good human being' throughout (or, equally often, the *spoudaios*, the serious person). By contrast, Aristotle rarely uses *kaloskagathia* at all.

certain kind of wealthy and well-born class is not based on a text interpretation of Plato or Aristotle, and Strauss does not claim that it is; instead, he holds that his preference for a kind of conventional aristocracy is based on an empirical historical proposition about the inevitability of democratic resistance to philosophy that holds true across a wide variety of times and places.⁶⁶ This is Strauss's empirical generalization, not Aristotle's. The key figure is the one Strauss calls 'the gentleman', whom he defines as follows: 'The gentleman will be a man of *not too great* inherited wealth, chiefly landed, but whose way of life is urban. He will be an urban patrician who derives his income from agriculture'.⁶⁷ Strauss, similar to MacIntyre, and perhaps similarly mistaken with respect to Aristotle, holds that the core of the moral life for Aristotle is magnanimity (*megalopsuchia*), or magnanimity plus justice, and that the gentleman is essentially identical with the magnanimous man.⁶⁸ But neither Plato nor Aristotle refers frequently to the *kalosk'agathos*. When Aristotle personifies the possessor of human virtues he typically calls them *epieikês* (decent) or *spoudaios* (serious) or *phronimos* (practically wise). Nor does Plato use *kaloskagathia* in the conventional way Strauss proposes.⁶⁹ The Socratic Greek author who *does* appeal to gentlemanliness in precisely the Straussian manner is not Plato, but Xenophon, in *Memorabilia* and *Oikonomikos*, something Strauss seems not to acknowledge, thus attributing without text-based argument a view strongly held by Xenophon to both Plato and Aristotle.⁷⁰

Granting Strauss's greater anti-democratic bias, both Strauss and MacIntyre doubt the value of a life spent within the horizons of the modern state and market, and both read Aristotle in the context of that doubt. Both individualism and republicanism (or 'Morality') are embedded in these institutions, and so they recognize the extent to which individualism threatens the chances for living good lives. They are both critics of liberal individualism, and they equally reject the possibility of

⁶⁶ Strauss, *NRH*, 143.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 142, emphasis added.

⁶⁸ Strauss, 'Progress or Return?', 249: 'There is a close relationship between the magnanimous man and the perfect gentleman'. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, IV.3, 1124a3-4.

⁶⁹ Plato rarely uses the term at all, and when he does he sometimes uses it in a clearly challenging and counter-cultural way, such as his proposal to the manly Callicles that a *kalosk'agathos* can be either a woman or a man. Plato, *Gorgias* 470e9-11. Use of this term to praise good citizens comes naturally to Plato's Anytus, not to his Socrates. Plato, *Meno* 92e-93a.

⁷⁰ Strauss does argue, that Xenophon 'points to a peak, a conversation between Socrates and Plato, but he does not supply it'. Does Strauss similarly point to a political peak beyond his high estimate of the place of the 'gentleman'? Leo Strauss, 'The Problem of Socrates', in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas Pangle (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 103-183 at 142.

large-scale communitarian transformations at the level of the nation state. For both, the focus of modern praxis should be on smaller and more clearly defined communities, ones that promote the development of virtues and an attachment to prohairesis lives that are open to the questions posed by zetetic moral and political philosophy and, eventually, to those posed by MacIntyre's natural and Strauss's Platonic theology. In an interview, after stating that he thinks modern politics on the level of the state is 'barren', MacIntyre says this:

What is not thus barren is the politics involved in constructing and sustaining small-scale local communities, at the level of the family, the neighborhood, the workplace, the parish, the school, or clinic, communities within which the needs of the hungry and the homeless can be met. I am not a communitarian. I do not believe in ideals or forms of community as a nostrum for contemporary social ills. I give my political loyalty to no program.⁷¹

I think the same could be said of Strauss, and it indicates ways in which their understandings of the modern implications of Aristotelianism and possibly Aristotle (or, for Strauss, Plato and Aristotle) overlap in stressing the possibilities of civil society as considerably greater than those of the market or the state. Richard Velkley makes this relevant point about the value of modern politics for Strauss:

Strauss warmly endorsed liberal democracy's defense of individual rights in its struggles with totalitarian enemies, not merely out of some self-regarding or even civic-minded prudence, but because the liberal-democratic regime permits the possibility of recalling how individual perfection transcends the political.⁷²

⁷¹ Borradori, Crocitto, and MacIntyre, *The American Philosopher*, 265. See also his strong critique of communitarianism: 'It is therefore a mistake, the communitarian mistake, to attempt to infuse the politics of the state with the values and modes of participation in local community. It is a further mistake to suppose that there is anything good about local community as such'. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 142.

⁷² Richard Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy: On Original Forgetting* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 137. See similar points about Strauss and the 'private realm': Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*.

Strauss, while critical of the basic economic and political premises of liberal society (see his agreement with C. B. Macpherson on the ‘possessive individualism’ of Hobbes and Locke) is not so willing as MacIntyre is to criticize the modern liberal state and free-market capitalism—but this disagreement is a matter of degree only, and is attributable to his concern with totalitarianism rather than any right-wing bias.⁷³

MacIntyre draws closer to Strauss in his attitude towards the modern state in *ECM*. He seems there to have become less critical of the work of the modern state, insofar as it *can* limit the harm done in the name of modern economism and individualism, than he was in *AV* (see *DRA* for this change, as well as *ECM*):

The history of modernity, insofar as it has been a series of social and political liberations and emancipations from arbitrary and oppressive rule, is indeed in key respects a history of genuine and admirable progress. . . . Yet it is this same modernity in which new forms of oppressive inequality, new types of material and intellectual impoverishment, and new frustrations and misdirections of desire have been recurrently generated.⁷⁴

Things could be better, things could be worse.

But perhaps the single most important point of agreement is theoretical: they agree that modern liberal democratic theory is so flawed

⁷³ MacIntyre’s debt to *and* his distance from Marx and Marxism are both clear. In *ECM*, MacIntyre praises Marx for being influenced by Aristotle, and several times refers to modern ‘actually existing socialism’ as ‘state capitalism’, borrowing the latter pejorative phrase from the early Marx: ‘The exploitative structures of both free market and state capitalism make it often difficult and sometimes impossible to achieve the goods of the workplace through excellent work’, 237. Modern ‘socialist’ states are not an alternative to capitalist states, but only another mode of exploitation. See more generally: *Ibid.*, 106-110. Marx is essential to MacIntyre for his theory of capitalist exploitation, but ‘Marxism had from the outset a defective understanding of human goods’. *Ibid.*, 281.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 123-124. He also acknowledges the economic successes of modernity, and the role these have played in maintaining the modern regime: ‘The social and cultural order of modernity in all its various forms is what it is only because of long-term—it has often seemed indefinitely long-term—economic growth and technological innovation, growth sometimes slow, sometimes fast, sometimes continuous, sometimes disrupted, sometimes deliberately shaped, more generally unplanned’. *Ibid.*, 170. See also: *ibid.*, 187 and MacIntyre, *DRA*, Ch. 11, in which he argues that the modern nation-state is, for the foreseeable future, indispensable for protecting the goods of public and individual security, while maintaining nonetheless that it is a dangerous fantasy to imagine that the modern nation-state can become a community that articulates and promotes human virtues.

that it cannot serve as a basis for re-thinking the possibilities of modern liberal democratic social and political institutions and practices. Strauss puts it this way in a lecture delivered in the 1950s at Chicago, and published, in edited form, as 'An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism':

The same effect which Heidegger produced in the late twenties and early thirties in Germany, he produced very soon in continental Europe as a whole. There is no longer in existence a philosophic position, apart from neo-Thomism and Marxism crude or refined. All rational liberal philosophic positions have lost their power. One may deplore this, but I for one cannot bring myself to cling to philosophic positions which have been shown to be inadequate. I am afraid that we shall have to make a very great effort in order to find a solid basis for rational liberalism. Only a great thinker could help us in our intellectual plight. But here is the great trouble: the only great thinker in our time is Heidegger.⁷⁵

MacIntyre, to be sure, rejects Strauss's opinion about the power of Heidegger's philosophy, but he accepts Strauss's view of the bankruptcy of modern *theory* as a guide to modern political and ethical *practice*.

One important difference between Strauss and MacIntyre concerns the chances for influencing modern practice. In this case, MacIntyre seems less pessimistic than Strauss. He argues that many and perhaps most modern 'plain persons' often think and speak about ethical questions in a quite Aristotelian way without knowing it and not at all in the manner of either modern moral philosophy or modern 'Morality', in spite of the cultural constraints imposed by the modern bureaucratic state and the modern capitalist economy. This position may make MacIntyre less radical than Strauss (or Heidegger) in his estimate of the chances for persuading plain persons to adopt his Aristotelian theoretical orientation and change their practical lives accordingly. It is also a way in which MacIntyre seems the more Aristotelian of the two, perhaps also the more moderate, and certainly the more ready to search for openings towards good practical theorizing in the modern humanities, arts, and social

⁷⁵ Leo Strauss, 'An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism', in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas Pangle (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 27-46 at 29.

sciences.⁷⁶ The conclusion of *ECM* is thus utterly at odds with the waiting-for-the new-St. Benedict conclusion of *AV*.

Strauss does not pursue the question of possible overlaps between our modern *endoxa* and mores and his Platonic theorizing. Why not? Perhaps his choice is rhetorical: he wants to stress the gap between ancients and moderns generally, and thus stress the need for reading ancient pre-Western philosophy. Or, possibly, Strauss does not see a similar unexpressed link between the ordinary ethical and political discourse of the modern Western marketplace and ancient philosophy because he holds that '[m]odern philosophy ... is the secularized form of Christianity', and seems to hold that while the separate existence and even flourishing of true philosophy and the state is possible (though always tense and never inevitable) under Islam (as established by Farabi) and Judaism (as established by Maimonides), this is less the case under Christianity, the prevailing religion of the West.⁷⁷

IV. Liberal Education

For both MacIntyre and Strauss, moral and political philosophy is necessarily an interpretive and historical—though in no way an historicizing—practice, one that can only proceed well on the basis of a conversation with texts and voices that challenge modern presuppositions. In this respect, MacIntyre and Strauss share a commitment to philosophical enquiry as aiming *both* at plausible text interpretation and at the truth about the world in general. For both, the path to truth leads through self-awareness, and the path to self-awareness leads through serious reading of and conversation about voices that challenge the self-awareness we absorb through our initiation into increasingly global modernity.

In MacIntyre, this requires following earlier contemporaries in the analytic tradition, such as Elizabeth Anscombe and Bernard Williams,

⁷⁶ My claim is that, even in societies in which agents are taught to think of themselves in quite other terms, the Aristotelian understanding of happiness often continues to be expressed in and presupposed by a wide range of activities, responses, and judgments, and this because it ... captures certain truths about human beings, truths that we acknowledge in our everyday practices even when they are inconsistent with the way in which we represent ourselves to ourselves'. MacIntyre, *ECM*, 201-202.

⁷⁷ See Leo Strauss, 'Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*', in *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959), 95-134 at 125-127. As Zuckert and Zuckert put it, 'As Strauss saw it, but seldom said, it was no accident that modernity arose within Christendom and not elsewhere'. Zuckert and Zuckert, *Strauss*, 82.

who stress, against the large majority of their colleagues, the necessity of actively listening and responding to older and supposedly superseded voices. Strauss also works within a recent tradition of studying philosophic antiquity, that established by Martin Heidegger, even though he clearly rejects the Heideggerian project of transcending ancient philosophy to establish or anticipate a new way of life in opposition to the practices of, say, Plato and Aristotle. In this way he resembles other students of Heidegger, notably Gadamer, Arendt, Jacob Klein, and Hans Jonas. In many of his writings Strauss speaks from inside the text, careful not to impose his own view on the author he is considering. This has led some to conclude, mistakenly, that Strauss is a ‘sphinx without a secret’, someone who has no views of his own on the central questions of political philosophy. It is easy to rebut this criticism on the basis of Strauss’s classroom teaching, now available in transcription, and in several of his public lectures that have been published since his death.

I think it can also be said that Strauss and MacIntyre share a substantive view about understanding the human things, one they expect liberal education to open up. It goes like this: human beings are uniquely characterized by a wide variety of desires and preferences, *and* by a potentiality to reflect on these desires and preferences, to deliberate and choose among them. This kind of reflective practice, or practical reason, is something that happens over the course of a lifetime, and is not a theoretical standard for judging particular choices and actions. For both Strauss and MacIntyre, the well-lived human life is not a ‘value’ but a fact about human nature, something we can discover by thinking and conversing about the needs, problems, and capabilities that characterize the life of a wide variety of members of the human species—by a non-reductive teleological naturalism of an Aristotelian kind that encourages us to imagine ways of life that are remote from our own.⁷⁸ Knowledge of a perfectly true answer to this quasi-permanent question about human nature is beyond our grasp, but it is possible to identify better and worse answers, always acknowledging the sceptical need to continue asking the question as central to this kind of ongoing and open-ended enquiry—there are no ‘knock-down’ answers that can allow us to put the question

⁷⁸ There is openness to pre-Western and non-Western philosophy that is explicit in MacIntyre, and implicit in the widespread reception of Strauss’s work in the Chinese-speaking world. As Kai Marchal suggests, ‘One might even wonder whether there was not *something deeply Chinese* in Strauss’s character’ (Marchal’s italics). ‘Modernity, Tyranny, and Crisis: Leo Strauss in China’, in Kai Marchal and Carl K. Y. Shaw eds., *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss in the Chinese-Speaking World: Reorienting the Political* (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 173-195. There is no such opening in the essentially Western thought-world of Kant and Rawls.

away once and for all.⁷⁹ Strauss is fond of citing Pascal to the effect that ‘we know too much to be sceptics and too little to be dogmatists’.⁸⁰ MacIntyre and Strauss are both in a specifically Aristotelian sense zetetic naturalists, in spite of Strauss’s explicit rejection of Aristotle’s biology as a ground for theory; both treat the problems/questions about the human good we confront as facts of nature, ones we must answer without having assurance or formulas for deciding whether the answers we come up with are completely true. Moreover, both hold that we must acknowledge that there is a more comprehensive good that is distinct from the human good, so that for both a successful, flourishing human life requires an awareness of the need to engage in reflection about what MacIntyre calls natural theology. In this respect, Strauss, MacIntyre, and Aristotle seem to be in perfect agreement.

One of the best-known passages in Strauss is his statement on the relationship between praiseworthy ways of life, the philosophical life (based on independent enquiry) and the Biblical life (based on revelation). Neither *bios* can refute the other; each is to the other a permanent *aporia*. The best, most fully human, response to this dilemma for human beings, he says, is neither to choose one or the other, nor to search for some transcendent synthesis of the two, but to acknowledge and live out this ‘tension between two codes’: ‘every one of us can be and ought to be either one or the other, the philosopher open to the challenge of theology or the theologian open to the challenge of philosophy’.⁸¹ My sense of the voice that speaks to us in the pages of *ECM* is that of a philosopher open to the challenge of theology (‘natural’ rather than ‘revealed’), perhaps even more so than Strauss himself.⁸² But this is in no way to deny that, for MacIntyre, there is no necessary contradiction—

⁷⁹ MacIntyre, *ECM*, 210. In terms of the role of education in human development, I think Strauss (and Aristotle) would agree with MacIntyre’s point: ‘We do indeed as infants, as children, and even as adolescents, experience sharp conflicts between egoistic and altruistic impulses and desires. But the task of education is to transform and integrate those into an inclination towards both the common good and our individual goods, so that we become neither ... egoists nor altruists, but those whose passions and inclinations are directed to what is both our good and the good of others. Self-sacrifice, it follows, is as much of vice, as much of a sign of inadequate moral development, as selfishness’. MacIntyre, *DRA*, 160.

⁸⁰ Strauss, *On Plato’s Symposium*, 4.

⁸¹ Strauss, ‘Progress or Return’, 270.

⁸² Hannah Arendt is not the only critic of Strauss who sees him as an ‘orthodox atheist’ rather than an ‘Orthodox Jew’. Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969*, eds. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt, 1992), 241 & 244. The question of Strauss’s stance towards religious belief cannot be easily resolved. For an illuminating and subtle treatment, see Leora Batnitzky, *Strauss and Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

and hence no need to acknowledge a Straussian life-giving tension—between such philosophizing and living the life of a traditional practising Roman Catholic, or Jew, or Muslim, or Confucian, so long as such practices do not obstruct the work of philosophical enquiry, or present a too precisely dispositive account of human *eudaimonia* and the human good.⁸³

To conclude: treating Strauss and MacIntyre as engaged in a dialogue, questioning as well as reinforcing one another, may even cause their work to be better and stronger than if we regard either as standing alone against mainstream modern Western philosophy—especially since both of them are committed to a kind of philosophizing that is zetetic rather than dispositive, in which there can be ‘no last word’. For both, asking the right orienting questions, ones obscured by the dogmas and alternatives of modern moral philosophy, matters considerably more than giving seemingly dispositive answers to ethical and political questions, given that both philosophers are committed to the view that the choices we make about how our lives can best flourish our lives must be guided by particular context as well as by practical theory. Like Plato’s Socrates in *Republic* VII, both MacIntyre and Strauss are committed to the view that the work of teaching is not a matter of transmitting knowledge from one mind to another but like turning the soul towards the things that are, trying to move students towards a deeper and truer set of opinions and questions about human life, and trying always to do so in a way that leads not to discipleship but towards further and better prohairetic enquiry.

⁸³ A tension that, in contrast to MacIntyre’s Aristotelianism, sometimes seems as much indebted to Nietzsche as to Plato or Aristotle.